

Statement of Hon. Norman Y. Mineta  
Belated Thank You to the  
Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007

(H.R. 23 introduced in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress by Bob Filner on January 4<sup>th</sup>,  
2007)

(S. 961 introduced in the Senate on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2007 by Ben Nelson, along  
with Ted Stevens, and Sam Brownback. Identical to H.R. 23).

Mr. Chairman,

It gives me great pleasure to share with you some of my thoughts on this important legislation. As the former Secretary of Transportation, my duties included the oversight of our nation's Maritime Administration which also involved the Ready Reserve Fleet and the United States Merchant Marine Academy – both institutions critical to the strategic security of the United States.

Through my work with the Maritime Administration and the Academy, I have come to know and respect America's Merchant Marine and our nation's mariners. No finer example could be given of their historical selfless service to our country than their great sacrifices during World War II.

The organization "American Merchant Marine at War" provides concise and compelling evidence of the Merchant Marine vets in World War II. It is notable that 243 American merchant mariners were killed by the Axis Powers even before the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. Merchant Mariners (men and women) were among the first prisoners of war in Europe and Asia and throughout the war, many lost their lives in prison camps. Many more suffered the brutal conditions of forced labor and enslavement in enemy concentration camps.

When World War II started, there were some 55,000 merchant mariners. With the need for thousands more mariners, the U.S. Maritime Service soon raised the ranks of mariners to more than 200,000. Proudly, the Merchant Marine was America's first racially integrated service.

During World War II – as part of their sea training experience, thousands of cadet midshipmen from the United States Merchant Marine Academy served in all maritime theaters of war aboard hundreds of merchant vessels. 142 of

these cadet midshipmen were killed in battle or in battle related actions, earning Kings Point the sole right to carry a “Battle Standard” for no other federal service academy has ever sent its cadets or midshipmen into harms way resulting in loss of life.

From the moment an American merchant ship left port in all theaters of war, it was subject to brutal attacks from the enemy. Together with their Navy guns crews, merchant mariners were assigned to battle stations on merchant vessels and fought the enemy from the sea or air. Merchant vessels actually successfully sank many enemy submarines and vessels and shot down numerous aircraft. In 1942, as a student, Cadet Midshipmen O’Hara from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy was serving aboard the S.S. Stephen Hopkins when it was attacked by two German surface raiders. The crew of the Stephen Hopkins fought gallantly and sunk one of the raiders. Later, as the fight continued, the gun crew was killed in action. Cadet O’Hara continued to fight on and was able to fire the last five shells from his vessels guns resulting in the sinking of the second enemy ship. Sadly, he lost his life in this heroic action – but in the process, he saved many of his crew members.

Merchant Mariners losses in World War II were staggering. More than 1500 American Merchant vessels were sunk supporting the war effort. With 1 in 26 merchant mariners killed in action, the American Merchant Marine suffered a significantly higher casualty rate than any of America’s services.

Consider the words of Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz when he said: “Our Navy, our Army and the aircraft of both would have been helpless to pound the enemy into defeat overseas had it not been for the steady stream of personnel and equipment brought by the ship’s of our merchant marine.”

The Commandant of the Marine Corps during the War, Lt. General Alexander A. Vandegrift, noted: “The Merchant Marine participated in every landing operation by the Marine Corps during World War II – from Guadalcanal to Iwo Jima.”

And finally, General MacArthur wrote, “With us they have shared the heaviest enemy fire. I have ordered them off their ships and into fox holes when their ships became untenable targets of attack. At our side, they have suffered in bloodshed and in death. I hold no branch of service in higher esteem.”

In 1944, the GI Bill of Rights was signed – a bill that recognized the sacrifices of the armed forces in World War II and provided lifetime benefits to help those who served during the War. Unfortunately, Merchant Mariners were not included in this legislation nor were their sacrifices recognized.

It is a curious fact that in so many battles at sea where merchant mariners fought hand in hand with their Navy gun crews assigned to their merchant vessels – only the Navy crews received recognition and benefits from the GI Bill. Merchant Mariners wounded or killed in the very same action did not even receive recognition for their same sacrifices.

When President Roosevelt signed the GI Bill, he noted – “I trust Congress will soon provide similar opportunities to members of the merchant marine who have risked their lives time and time again during the war for their country.”

In fact, a “Seaman’s Bill of Rights” was introduced in 1945 and 1947. This Bill would have provided similar benefits to the GI Bill, including, various loan programs, funding for education, and disability benefits.” This legislation was never enacted.

H.R. 23 and its companion S. 961 offer America a unique opportunity to right a historical wrong – indeed to offer a “belated thank you” to those merchant mariners who served in World War II.

America is a nation that endeavors to thank its citizens who have been called to serve their nation but sometimes we have made mistakes in overlooking all those who have served. Clearly without the incredible service of America’s Merchant Marine and the tens of thousands of mariners who sailed into harms way to deliver the equipment and supplies that won the war, America and the world might be a very different and dark place.

Time is running short to finally thank the Merchant Mariners of World War II. Let us not squander this opportunity.

#

#

#

#